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IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

BY WITTER BYNNER

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

THE NEW WORLD

THE LITTLE KING

TIGER

AN ODE TO HARVARD

AT ALL BOOKSELLERS

EURIPIDES

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

AN ENGLISH VERSION BY
WITTER BYNNER



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MCMXV

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TO
BARRY FAULKNER

*Where that corner-house then stood,
Where your room was, and our talks,
Laths and doors and tumbled bricks
Pile their dust upon the walks,*

*Thrown by no slow touch of time,
No quick blast of magic fire,
But by sure, destroying hands,
Hands of builders, building higher.*

*Yet the builders with their derricks,
They shall never reach so high
As a blue-ascending tower
We were building in the sky. . . .*

*O remember how we built it
Higher than in all the lands:—
And be mindful of that corner
Where a topless tower stands!*

Isadora Duncan said one day, " If only there were a simple English version of IPHIGENIA, as human as the Greek, no rhymes, no inversions, no loss of meaning in the sound!" And when I wrote her this, she liked and used it. Therefore the blame or praise be partly hers.

WITTER BYNNER.

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS

On the seashore stands a great Temple, with steps leading to a blood-stained altar. Iphigenia, the Priestess, comes out of the Temple.

IPHIGENIA.

Pelops, the son of Tantalus, by speed
Of chariot earned a bride, who bore him Atreus.
And Atreus had two sons, one Menelaus,
The other Agamemnon, who in turn
By Clytemnestra had a child, and I
Am she, Iphigenia.

It is thought
That I was sacrificed by my own father
To Artemis, in the great quest of Helen,
Upon an altar near the bay of Aulis,
There where the long deep waves are caught and
broken

Hither and thither by the winds. That bay
Held Agamemnon's fleet, the thousand ships
From Hellas, waiting to avenge on Troy
The wrong done Menelaus by the loss
Of Helen. But a storm came up and still

Iphigenia in Tauris

Another storm, and neither sea nor wind
Would favor Agamemnon. So he asked
Calchas the soothsayer to consult the flame.
And this is what was answered: "Agamemnon,
Captain of Hellas, there can be no way
Of setting free thy ships till Artemis
Has had fulfilled Her promised sacrifice.
For thou hadst vowed to sacrifice each year
The fairest thing the year produced. And due
To Her long since was one whom Clytemnestra
Bore thee, the fairest of the year, thy daughter
Iphigenia . . . Let her be brought and killed."

They sent Odysseus with his lying tongue
To lure me from my mother, on the plea
That I should wed Achilles. When I came
To Aulis, they laid hold of me and led
Me to the flame, and would have struck — I saw
The knife! But Artemis deceived their eyes,
Leaving a deer instead, and stole me through
The radiant blue until She set me down
Here in the town of Tauris, where there live
Barbaric men ruled by their uncouth King,
Thoas, a rider reckless as the wind.
He made of me a priestess in Her Temple,
And here I serve Her on Her festal days.
It has a holy sound, that word, but far
From holy are the rites I . . . Yet I dare
Not question. Dumbly I must sacrifice
To Her delight strangers who happen here.

Iphigenia in Tauris

It was their custom long before I came.
My hands ordain the victim. Other hands,
Inside the Inner Temple, drain his blood,
Which then is poured upon this altar-stone.

(She comes down the steps)

I dreamed last night a deathly dream. Perhaps
The morning will dispel it if I speak it.
I dreamed myself at home again in Argos,
Asleep among my maidens — when a roll
Of thunder shook the ground. I ran outside.
I watched the house. I saw the coping fall.
Then the whole palace plunged from roof to base.
Only one column stood untouched, of all
My father's home. And that one stood alive,
A man with bright brown hair and breathing lips.
Then I began unwillingly to touch
His brow with the water that means woe to
strangers —

And with the tears of my interpretation.

Must it not mean Orestes? — Dead, dead!
It was my brother whom I touched with tears.
The pillar of a family is the son,
And in those waters is the sign of death.
Let me then pour the funeral-cup, for him
Who is too far away for nearer rites.

(She goes up the steps again)

Iphigenia in Tauris

Come now, my maidens, my Hellenic maidens,
O captives of the king! — Enslaved to serve
The living, let us freely serve the dead.

I must go in and pray, then call to them
By the great summons of the Temple-bell.

(She goes into the Temple)

ORESTES.

(Cautiously following Pylades toward the Temple)

Take care lest someone should be coming by!

PYLADES.

I looked both ways and there is no one coming.

ORESTES.

Is this the Shrine of Artemis, which we
Set out from Argos over many seas
To find? O Pylades! — is this the Shrine?

PYLADES.

I think it is, Orestes. So dost thou.

ORESTES.

Is that the stone, dark with the blood of Greeks?

PYLADES.

If ever I saw blood — look, on the edge!

Iphigenia in Tauris

ORESTES.

And there beneath the roof, spoils of the dead!

PYLADES.

Trophies of strangers whom these men have murdered.

ORESTES.

Be careful how thou goest then — be watchful!

Why has Thy oracle, O Phœbus, sent
This thing upon me and the sight of blood
Again? Have I not seen enough of blood?
My mother shed my father's blood, I hers.
And then the Furies, with their eyes bloody,
Hunted me down, a wanderer through the world —
Till fugitive I went to Thee, to pray
An end of all the cycles of despair
That sped me, maddened me, hurled me through
Hellas.

Thy answer came: "Go seek the Taurian land
Where Artemis my Sister has Her Shrine.
Discover there Her effigy that fell
From Heaven into the Temple. Then by skill
Or by good-fortune take it and proceed
Surviving every hazard, and convey
The Image to the holy land of Athens."
No more was said, except that by this deed
I was to be relieved of my afflictions . . .

Iphigenia in Tauris

And here I am, O Phœbus, far from home
Upon this dismal shore — obeying Thee.

Now, Pylates, companion of my task,
What course are we to take? To scale these walls
Would be impossible. Are we to climb
The open stairs? — and so be seen? Are we
To force the brazen locks, not knowing where
They lead? For if they come upon us here,
It will be certain death. Shall we not turn
In time and take our ship? O, let me face
The Furies, rather than inflict this thing
On thee!

PYLADES.

What do we know of flight? How dare
We take a course of which our hearts know nothing?
Why should we disobey Apollo's voice
And offer Him dishonor? No! There must
Be ways. Come, let us leave the Temple, hide
Ourselves in some dark cave and shun the ship
Lest it should be attacked and we be captured.

Look! through that opening between the beams
A man might lower himself inside the wall! —
A coward drops the cup. But a brave man's drink
Is hardship. And by all the Gods shall we,
Coming as far as this, now at the end turn back?

ORESTES.

No. Thou art saying what I too should say.

Iphigenia in Tauris

So let us go and find our hiding-place.
Phœbus would never tolerate defeat
Of His commandment. Come! Have we not
youth?—
Add youth to courage, we can move the world.

(They go out)

*(The great bell rings. One by one the Temple
Maidens assemble)*

A MAIDEN.

O ye who dwell upon these Clashing Rocks
That guard the Euxine Sea,
Keep silence now before Latona's Daughter,
Artemis, Goddess of the pointed hills!

(Turning toward the Altar)

O Artemis, I come
On consecrated feet into Thy court,
I hail Thee beautiful
In Thy gold dome above the colonnades!

A SECOND MAIDEN.

Thy priestess calls me, she who keeps Thy keys,
Who left behind, for Thee,
Her land of Hellas, the embattled walls,
The shore of horses, and the quiet fields

Wherein my father lived.
I must obey her call and worship Thee
In this embittered land
Far from Eurotas and from happiness.

A THIRD MAIDEN.

(Going to Iphigenia, who enters from the Temple)

O daughter of the king that gathered ships
A thousand strong and led
Unnumbered men against high-towering Troy,
I heard thee call and I have come to thee.
Why hast thou summoned us?
What makes thy cheek so thoughtful and so pale?
What has thy tongue to tell,
That thy brow is dark and bowed upon thy hands?

IPHIGENIA.

My maidens, listen! Listen while I tell
What I have seen. The Muse has hid Her face
And I am mourning for a kinsman lost.
Last night I had a dream of destiny.
O weep with me! — I saw my brother dead!
My dream was clear. My father's house is ended,
My race broken and gone, Orestes dead!
What anguish, Argos, art thou made to bear
When Fate pursues me still and takes from me
My only brother! —

Iphigenia in Tauris

To the vanished dead
Let me now pour this offering, this gift
Upon the earth, commingled of the milk
Of mountain-kine and of the wine of Bacchus
And of the honey that the russet bees
Gathered,— a soothing gift for him I loved.
Give me the heavy urn of gold, to hold
My offering to the God of Death.

This urn,
Orestes, son of Agamemnon, thou
That liest dead beneath the earth, I bring
And pour for thee. Better I cannot bring,
I cannot bring to thee my heavy locks,
I cannot lay them, weeping, on thy grave.
And yet, though men believe me long since dead,
I still can weep, far from my home and thee.

A FOURTH MAIDEN.

O Lady, woe is in me for thy woe,
My song is like the song
Of old that mourners in the far-off east
Chant for the dead, reciting only death,
The very song of hell,
A wail of no returning and no hope,
Using no note of glory,
Only the desolation of the grave.

THE FIRST MAIDEN.

Mourn for the sons of Atreus, in whose house

Iphigenia in Tauris

The hearth can never burn!
Mourn for their bitter heritage, a home
That waits the coming of some happy King
But cannot give him welcome!
Trouble is born forever in their sky
Since Phœbus turned His car
Of toppling horses out of the course of joy.

THE THIRD MAIDEN.

There was desired long since a golden lamb,
And out of the dispute
Mischievous arose to tantalize thy house . . .

THE FOURTH MAIDEN.

Vengeance has made its unappeased way
With every dart of death
And visited thy family one by one,
And now with eager hand
Fate is pursuing thee. Thy turn has come.

IPHIGENIA.

O bitter my beginning in the womb
Of her who bore me, from the very night
That she conceived! Appointed by the Fates
To suffer in this world, I was a child
Accursed. Yet how she cherished me, her first-born,
And thrilled that I, of all the girls of Argos,
Should be a bride upon the way to Troy!

What had she borne me for and loved me for? —

Iphigenia in Tauris

To come to nothing, through my father's fault!
To come, behind the horses of delight,
Not to Achilles — but to grief and horror!

And now beside this melancholy sea
I live my days — lonely, no love, no friends,
Wife of no man and mother of no child.
I know no home. I sing no Argive song
With Argive women to the Queen of Heaven.
I weave upon the whirring loom no tale
Of Pallas routing Titans . . . O, instead,
I see an altar stained with bloody death.
I hear the cry for pity and the moans
Of men — a woe too hideous to be told.

Yet even that is little to me now —
Now that a throne is empty and his eyes
Are past all weeping, as I wish mine were.
For I who loved Orestes all those years
Shall never see him now but as I left him,
A little baby at his mother's breast —
I who had thought to see him as a King.

THE SECOND MAIDEN.

Look! — from the beach a herdsman comes to thee,
Comes like a man with news!

HERDSMAN.

(Arriving breathless)

O daughter of the house of Agamemnon,

Iphigenia in Tauris

I have a thing to tell!

IPHIGENIA.

Is it a thing
To warrant this intrusion?

HERDSMAN.

Yes . . . A ship
From sea has rounded the Symplegades
And in the mist two men have come ashore,
Young, worthy to be offered on the altar!
Make ready then the Feast of Artemis!

IPHIGENIA.

Where are they from? — what country? Couldst
thou tell?

HERDSMAN.

From Hellas, but I could not say what part.

IPHIGENIA.

What were their names? Thou must have heard
their names!

HERDSMAN.

One of them called the other "Pylades."

IPHIGENIA.

And the one who spoke?

Iphigenia in Tauris

HERDSMAN.

We did not hear his name.

IPHIGENIA.

Where were they captured?

HERDSMAN.

Down beside the sea.

IPHIGENIA.

What were you herdsmen doing by the sea?

HERDSMAN.

Washing our cattle there.

IPHIGENIA.

But answer me,
How were they captured? It is new to me
And unbelievable. For all this time
Has passed and never brought a Greek before
To bleed in sacrifice — never a Greek.

HERDSMAN.

Just as we drove our cattle from the woods
In that long hollow where the curling tide
Has cut away the cliff, where fishers rest
From purple-fishing, one of us ahead
Came stealing back on tiptoe and he warned us:
“They are not men but Gods! Behind that rock! —

Not men but Gods!" And then another herds-
man,

Caught sight of them, raised up his hands and
prayed:

"God in whose keeping are all ships, Palæmon! —

Have mercy on us, whether these be Sons

Of Zeus or Brothers of the Fifty Nereids!"

But another mocked our fear and laughed aloud,

Daring the possible anger of the Gods.

For he maintained there must have been a wreck

And these were mariners who chose that cave

To hide in, having heard that strangers here

Are sacrificed. And he persuaded most

Of us; and we were planning what to do

To capture them — when one of them came out

Into full view and, standing there a moment,

Stared not at us nor anything we saw

But straight above him, groaning, shuddering,

And bent his head from one side to the other

Behind his arms, like one delirious,

And then cried out as sharply as a hunter:

"Look, Pylades! O look at her! O look!

There! — there! Dost thou not see her now? —

that Fury

From hell! Look at the serpent on her head

With mouth wide open, writhing for my blood!

Another! — and another! Look at her

High on the cliff, belching a flame at me

And holding in her hands my mother's body

Till she can hurl it down on me and kill me!
O they are all around me! Pylades!"
And we could tell by the motion of his head
When the dogs barked or when the cattle lowed
That some invisible Fury mocking him
Became a threat to him in every sound.

In our amazement we were sitting there
Like stricken men — when out he whipped his sword
And, quick as a lion, leapt upon our herd
As if attacking Furies there. He slashed
Their sides with might and main until the rim
Of the sea was rolling thick with gore. We saw
Our herd wounded and dying and we looked
For sticks to arm ourselves and blew our horns
For help. And then when slowly we approached
him —

His madness left him. I can see him now
Standing a moment. While I watch he drops
In a heap and foaming at the lips. Our chance! —
Our chance! Forward we hurried with our
cudgels

And rocks. But still his comrade, unafraid,
Leaned over him and wiped his lips and held
A linen fold above his face protecting him —
Till suddenly the fallen man stood up
Calm and himself again and saw the rush
Of stones that neared him like a breaking wave.
He gave one groan as we surrounded him;
And then we heard his voice ring clear and say:

Iphigenia in Tauris

“Death, Pylades! Then let us meet it well —
Like men! Out with thy sword and follow me!”

Back from the glittering swords we ran, to lure
Them to the glen. For there when some of us
Would run to shelter others could hurl rocks
To draw the pursuers off and then could fly
And let the first come back again with stones.
And yet the destined offering stood clean.
For, strange as it may sound, of all the stones
We volleyed at those men, not one went true!
All we could hope for was to wear them out.
So, working round them in a ring, we struck
Their swords with stones, until they lost their hold
And had no breath for the recovery.

And then we took them captive to the King,
Who ordered us to bring them here to thee
To be prepared and bled for Artemis.

Ask Artemis, O priestess, to direct
Other such wanderers as these to Tauris!
Let men from Hellas shed their blood for thine
Which men from Hellas clamored for at Aulis!

THE FIRST MAIDEN.

This is no common man who came away
From the land of Hellas to an alien shore
And battled like a God!

IPHIGENIA.

Go back and bring me the two mariners.

Iphigenia in Tauris

I shall be ready for them with the rites.

(Exit the Herdsman)

Poor heart of mine, which in the days gone by
Was tender and compassionate to strangers,
And even yesterday grew pitiful
At thought of men from Hellas coming here,
A cruel dream has changed thee overnight.
For since Orestes is no more alive,
Now, where my heart was, there is only
stone

And you who come today, no matter who,
Will find in me a woman without tears.

Friends, by my own unhappiness I know
That the experience of evil days
Brings disregard for lesser sufferers.

No heaven-sent wind has ever forced a ship
Between the Clashing Rocks, bringing me Helen,
That Helen whom I hate, and Menelaus,
That I might make of them the sacrifice,
Let a new Aulis expiate the old —
And have my vengeance! — It was Helen's fault
And his, that Greek hands lifted me at Aulis
And led me like a beast before the altar —
Where he who held the knife was my own father.

I live it all again. My hands groping
Go out to him again and touch his beard

Iphigenia in Tauris

And cling about his knees. I cry to him:
"O thou thyself, thyself, hast brought me here!
Thou hast deceived my maidens and my mother!
They sing my marriage-song at home, they fill
The house with happiness . . . and all the
time

Here am I dying — slain, father, by thee!
Thou hast led me in thy chariot, to take
Achilles for my lord. But here is death —
And on my lips no kiss but only blood!"

And I had left my home with my white veil
Drawn down. I had not taken in my arms
My brother, who is dead, nor kissed my sister.
I had saved all my kisses and embraces
For him I thought to marry . . . Yet my heart
Was homesick even then and ached with hope
That I should soon come back again to Argos.

And thou art dead, Orestes, and thou too
Foregoest our inheritance, our home!

O what has Artemis desired of me? —
She who forbids Her court to any man
Whose hand is stained with bloodshed or with touch
Of childbirth or of burial, calls him
Unclean and bans him — She so scrupulous
In all these things — will yet receive the blood
Of human beings on Her altar-stone?
It is not credible. Latona bore
To Zeus no daughter so unkind! The thing

Is no more true than are the tales they tell
Of Tantalus preparing for the Gods
A child whom They devoured . . . Artemis,
These people being murderers themselves,
Impute to Thee their own iniquity.—
No! — I will not believe it of a God!

THE SECOND MAIDEN.

Who can these be that left the holy streams
Of Dirce, or the reeds
Green-growing in Eurotas, to prefer
This bitter beach, to dare the ominous rocks
Where the seas meet in fog,
Where Artemis, among Her colonnades
Demanding sacrifice,
Receives upon Her altars human blood?

THE FOURTH MAIDEN.

Why have they urged the oarsmen on their ship
To shake the clinging sea
With a great stroke, and to accelerate
With rush of rivalry the racing wind?
Was it to sweep the shores
For riches and to vie in bearing home,
Each to upbuild his house,
The treasures and the trophies of the world?

That glittering hope is immemorial
And beckons many men

Iphigenia in Tauris

To their undoing. Ever insatiate,
They sail the sea and look to foreign towns
To fill their ships with spoil.
But some men never find prosperity,
For all their voyaging;
While others find it with no voyaging.

THE THIRD MAIDEN.

How have they passed the peril of the rocks
That clash? and of the beach
Of Phineus heavy with broken waves?
How have they turned their rudder to the land
Where the Fifty Nereids
Hand in hand dance and circle round and sing,
Where the wings of ocean brood,
And where Achilles rode by the dark water?

THE FIRST MAIDEN.

My Lady prayed that Fate might hither bring,
On the way home from Troy,
The cause of her great misery. O would
That Helen, Helen had been blown ashore,
That on her fatal head,
For recompense, the holy drops might fall
And that my Lady's knife
Might find in her the fitting sacrifice!

THE SECOND MAIDEN.

But I have prayed for a deliverer,

Iphigenia in Tauris

Some mariner from Hellas
Able to end our pain and set us free.
Ever I go, though only in a dream,
Back to my father's home . . .
No man has greater riches than the joy
That comes to us in visions —
They cannot take away from us our dreams.

THE THIRD MAIDEN.

Look where they come! — two captives bound in
chains!
The herdsman's news was true!
Hush for the offering to Artemis!

THE SECOND MAIDEN.

See, Hellas, how thy hands are impotent
To change this ritual!

THE FOURTH MAIDEN.

O Artemis, if Tauris in Thy sight
Win favor by this gift,
Assert Thy custom and receive this blood!

IPHIGENIA.

Let me now think of none but Artemis
And serve Her with the worship She demands.

Loosen their hands. For in this holy court
Chains are unhallowed things. Enter the Temple.

Iphigenia in Tauris

Prepare the altar for the ritual.

(Turning to the captives)

I wonder who your mother was? — your father? —
Whether you had a sister who has lost
Her brothers and laments their bravery? —
Invisible and mute, Fate comes and goes
And never whispers where Her blow shall fall;
None of us ever sees Her in the dark
Or understands Her cruel mysteries.
Tell me, unhappy men, where are you from? —
You who are far from home and yet must go
Farther away from home even than this!

ORESTES.

What woman art thou, weeping for our lot?
What can we mean to thee, to draw thy pity,
To make our tribulation difficult?

There is no wisdom in lamenting death
And only fools, when they behold it near,
Meet it with tears. The man who doubles death
By the cowardice of pitying himself
Earns for himself contempt as well as death . . .
Let us accept our fortune as it comes —
No pity and no tears! We dared our fate.
And what we undertook — we undertook.

IPHIGENIA.

One of your names was brought me by a herdsman.

Iphigenia in Tauris

Tell me then, which of you is Pylades?

ORESTES.

He, if it does thee any good to know.

IPHIGENIA.

And from what town in Hellas?

ORESTES.

Does it matter?

IPHIGENIA.

And are you brothers?

ORESTES.

In all else but birth.

IPHIGENIA.

And what may I call thee?

ORESTES.

Unfortunate!

IPHIGENIA.

That would be pity's name for thee, not mine.

ORESTES.

Then say I have no name and call me nothing.

Iphigenia in Tauris

IPHIGENIA.

Art thou so jealous for thy reputation?

ORESTES.

Come, sacrifice my body, not my name!

IPHIGENIA.

Thou wilt not even name for me thy town?

ORESTES.

I am so soon a townsman of no town.

IPHIGENIA.

Surely it is not much to tell me that.

ORESTES.

Ah, but it is — when one can answer, “Argos”!

IPHIGENIA.

Argos? not Argos? thou art not from Argos?

ORESTES.

My town, Mycenæ, was a lordly place.

IPHIGENIA.

Then what could bring thee from it? — banishment?

ORESTES.

A kind of banishment — yet self-imposed.

Iphigenia in Tauris

IPHIGENIA.

How fortunate to see a son of Argos!

ORESTES.

But not to be one in thy company!

IPHIGENIA.

And let me ask about another town —

ORESTES.

But why this questioning?

IPHIGENIA.

O tell me news

Of that most talked-of town in all the world!

What hast thou heard of Troy?

ORESTES.

By all the Gods,

I wish that I had never heard its name!

IPHIGENIA.

But is it true that Troy is overthrown?

ORESTES.

Its towers lie broken in the dust.

IPHIGENIA.

And Helen?

Has Menelaus taken Helen back?

Iphigenia in Tauris

ORESTES.

And soon repented. For she brings him sorrow.

IPHIGENIA.

She brought me sorrow too. Where is she now?

ORESTES.

Gone back with him to Sparta.

IPHIGENIA.

How I hate

The name of Helen! How all Hellas hates it!

ORESTES.

I have my own good cause for hating it.

IPHIGENIA.

Did the Achæans return home contented?

ORESTES.

It would take many tongues to answer that.

IPHIGENIA.

But tell me quickly, while there still is time!

ORESTES.

Then ask me quickly. I will answer thee.

IPHIGENIA.

What of the soothsayer, Calchas? Where is he?

Iphigenia in Tauris

ORESTES.

Reported dead at home.

IPHIGENIA.

O Artemis,
Hail for that news! And is Odysseus dead?

ORESTES.

Neither at home nor dead — but wandering.

IPHIGENIA.

O how I pray he never reaches home!

ORESTES.

Why wish him that? Has he not borne enough?

IPHIGENIA.

What of Achilles?

ORESTES.

Dead. His marriage planned
At Aulis never happened.

IPHIGENIA.

Those who knew
About that plan knew it a cruel lie.

ORESTES.

Knowing these things, art thou thyself from Hellas?

Iphigenia in Tauris

IPHIGENIA.

I was, but lost my home long, long ago.

ORESTES.

No wonder thou art asking me these questions!

IPHIGENIA.

What of that king they called The Happy King?

ORESTES.

The one I think thou meanest was not happy.

IPHIGENIA.

I ask of Agamemnon.

ORESTES.

I know nothing,
Nothing of him. O ask me no more questions!

IPHIGENIA.

But no news must be good news! Say it is!

ORESTES.

The news is death — his and another's death.

IPHIGENIA.

O Agamemnon! O King Agamemnon!

ORESTES.

Could he be kin to thee, thou carest so?

Iphigenia in Tauris

IPHIGENIA.

Remembering his glory and his pride!

ORESTES.

All of it ended by his own wife's hand.

IPHIGENIA.

O! — Pitable woman! Poor, poor king!

ORESTES.

Ask me no more, I beg, not one word more!

IPHIGENIA.

But is she living? Answer me but that!

ORESTES.

Her own son killed her.

IPHIGENIA.

Why?

ORESTES.

To be avenged
On her who killed his father.

IPHIGENIA.

How exact
He was, how just! Yet how I pity him!

Iphigenia in Tauris

ORESTES.

And well thou mayest. No God pities him.

IPHIGENIA.

Not one of Agamemnon's children left?

ORESTES.

Electra, yes. But loses him she loves!

IPHIGENIA.

What has been said of her they sacrificed?

ORESTES.

Nothing of her, except that she is dead.

IPHIGENIA.

O miserable king, willing to slay her!

ORESTES.

O wicked war caused by a wicked woman,
And all the waste and wicked consequence!

IPHIGENIA.

The son of the dead king — alive in Argos?

ORESTES.

Living, but not in Argos, not in Argos!

IPHIGENIA.

My dream was nothing then, it lied to me!

Iphigenia in Tauris

ORESTES.

Dreams, lies, lies, dreams,— nothing but emptiness!
Even the Gods with all Their name for wisdom
Have only dreams and lies and lose Their course,
Blinded, confused and ignorant as we.

The wisest man is he who goes his way
And listens to no prophet guiding him.
The fool is he who follows oracles,
Forsaking his own judgment. Those who know
Know such a man can only come to wreck.

THE SECOND MAIDEN.

O who will bring us news whether our kin
Are living or are dead!

IPHIGENIA.

Let me suggest a plan that I have thought of,
To our advantage, yours as well as mine.
And nothing makes more surely for achievement
Than interests in common. Tell me this . . .
Wilt thou go back, if I can grant thee leave,
Bearing for me to Argos and my friends
A letter that has been prepared for them?
My words were written down by one who died
Here at my ritual but pitied me,
Blaming his blood on Artemis, not me.
No one had come from Hellas, not one Greek,
Whose life might be conceded to bear home
My message. But in thee I find a man
Worthy to carry it, knowing the names

Iphigenia in Tauris

And places dear to me. And so I ask
Thy help and offer in exchange thy life —
With one condition: that thy friend remain,
To pay the sacrifice to Artemis.

ORESTES.

I thank thee, Lady, for a fair proposal,
Save in that one respect. What would my life
Be worth to me, earned by deserting him?
I am the captain of this misadventure,
And he but sailed with me to comfort me.
It would be wrong if he should pay the cost
And I repudiate my enterprise.
Thy errand shall be done — but not by me.
Give him thy confidence, give him thy letter.
To thee it makes no difference which of us
Carries the message homeward. And to me
It makes no difference when I die or how.
But if I brought disaster on a friend
And yet myself went free, then there would be
No faith left in me, no respect, no love.
Besides, his life is dear to me as mine.
His life is mine. For in his life — I live.

IPHIGENIA.

Thou hast a heart of gold and must be sprung
From some great seed, to be so true a friend. . . .
If only the survivor of my race
May be like thee! I have a brother left,

Iphigenia in Tauris

Although I should not know him by his face.
As thou hast chosen then, so let it be.
Thy friend shall take the letter — and thou prove
Thy love by laying down thy life for him.

ORESTES.

Whose is the hand that sacrifices me?

IPHIGENIA.

Whose hand but mine! Artemis willed it so.

ORESTES.

Thy hand! Thy poor, unenviable hand!

IPHIGENIA.

What is imposed on me I must obey.

ORESTES.

A woman hold the knife to shed men's blood!

IPHIGENIA.

Not that! — O not the knife! — Only the water,
The sacrificial water for thy brow.

ORESTES.

Who is it then that strikes the final blow?

IPHIGENIA.

Inside the Shrine are men who do that part.

Iphigenia in Tauris

ORESTES.

When I am burnt, what happens to my body?

IPHIGENIA.

They seal the ashes in a rocky cleft.

ORESTES.

O that my sister's hand might tend my body!

IPHIGENIA.

She is too far away from thee to hear
Petition for the gift she cannot give. . . .
Being from Argos, let me care for thee,
Let me do everything that she might do!
I will array thy body in rich robes —
Then pour upon the embers yellow oil
Cooling and clean and the golden essences
That bees collect from every mountain-flower,
To make thee pure and sweet. . . .

Now I must go
And bring my letter. I have kept it here
So long a while.— O think of me with pity.

See that you guard these men, but do not bind them.

O if at last my letter should arrive
In Argos and be opened by the hand
Of him I love, a letter never dreamed-of,
Then he would listen through the opening grave
And hear my living lips cry out to him!

Iphigenia in Tauris

(She goes into the Temple)

THE FIRST MAIDEN.

I pity thee upon whose fated head
The water shall be sprinkled!

ORESTES.

But choose not pity. Change it into hope.

THE SECOND MAIDEN.

Let me then hope, but not for thee, for him,
That he may come again
Into his father's country and be blest.

PYLADES.

But how can he be blest who leaves his friend?

THE FIRST MAIDEN.

Or I hold back my pity for thy death?

THE FOURTH MAIDEN.

And yet I pity thee, having to live.

THE THIRD MAIDEN.

Which is unhappier?

THE FOURTH MAIDEN.

I cannot tell,— I watch and cannot tell
Whether to pity thee, or thee, the more.

Iphigenia in Tauris

ORESTES.

O Pylades, what art thou thinking of?

PYLADES.

What dost thou think that I am thinking of?

ORESTES.

This woman! Thou rememberest her questions,
Each one so apt; of the defeat of Troy,
Of the Achæans' homecoming, of Calchas,
Of Achilles, and her great concern
At Agamemnon's death and then her questions
About his wife and children? I believe
That she herself, she too, belongs in Argos! —
Or she would never send a letter there
And make all these inquiries anxiously
As if the fate of Argos were her own.

PYLADES.

Thou hast expressed what I was wondering.
And yet I thought it natural enough
That in a city at all civilized
People should ask about the fate of kings . . .
But that was not what troubled me, so much as —

ORESTES.

As what? Tell me and let me help thee solve it.

PYLADES.

How canst thou wrong me, thinking I would live

And let thee die? As I set out with thee
So shall I journey with thee to the end,
Or I should never show my face again
Among the hills of Argos, but to be
Despised and pointed out in every valley
As one who had betrayed a friend. And worse
Than that would be declared of me, the worst
That evil minds can conjure and enjoy —
Even that I had wished thy death, or caused it,
That I might profit by inheritance
And, being thy sister's husband, win thy throne.

See how afraid I am and how ashamed
Of the very thought of leaving thee. One way,
And only one is open. Where thou goest,
Though to the knife and to the flame, I follow —

That I may be beyond a doubt thy friend.

ORESTES.

Thou canst not be my friend and yet deny me.
I bear a load that cannot be laid down,
And wilt thou lighten thine by doubling mine?
All the humiliating shame that thou
But fearest from men's tongues would fall to me
In my own heart from my own conduct, if I let
The services thou didst me bring thee harm.

What has Fate left me of my life to cherish
But a good ending? As for thee, my friend,
Thou hast not any right to choose to die.

Thou hast the blessing of thy happy blood
To make thee wish to live. And so I pray
That by thy life a comfort may be brought
To my afflicted house. O Pylades,
When thou art home, there with thy wife, my sister,
Beget for me, dear friend, my happiness.
Let my name live again and in thy children
The house of Agamemnon be renewed.
Therefore go back and make my home thy home.
And having come to Hellas and the shore
Where the Argive horsemen ride — give me thy
hand

And swear that thou wilt make a grave for me
And lay on it memorials and let
My sister bring, remembering me, a lock
Of her long hair. Tell her that I was led
Before the altar by the hand of one
Who came from Argos, by a woman's hand,
And how my blood at last was purified.
O Pylades, be good to her, be true!
And fare thee well, my best and truest friend,
Loved in my boyhood when I shared my sport
Over the hills with thee and in my manhood
When my sorrows came and thou wert with me still!

By falsely prophesying, Phœbus lied
To me and tricked me; luring me away
From home, lest watchful eyes in Hellas see
That Gods, like men, can break Their promises.

Iphigenia in Tauris

I gave Him everything, my faith, my will,
I killed my mother for He bade me strike . . .
And in return He has forsaken me.

PYLADES.

Let me obey then not myself but thee —
And build thy tomb in Hellas. Be assured
That I shall love thy sister well and always.
And having loved thee living, I shall know
How to receive thee closer in thy death . . .
If death it be. We marvel at the Gods
And their mysterious way of keeping hid
The face of life behind a mask of death,
Then showing the true face.

ORESTES.

The time is gone
For the Gods to show that face — for she has come.

IPHIGENIA.

(Returning and addressing the Attendants)

Precede me into the Temple and be ready.

(The Attendants enter the Temple)

Here is my letter, all this length of it . . .
Yet I have wondered. When a man arrives

Iphigenia in Tauris

Out of his danger, he forgets his fear
And sometimes he forgets his promises.
Wherefore my apprehension lest thy friend,
When he is freed and on his way again,
Forget how much this letter means to me.

ORESTES.

And what dost thou propose, to ease thy mind?

IPHIGENIA.

That he shall swear to take this where I say.

ORESTES.

And wilt thou make an oath matching his oath?

IPHIGENIA.

To do what, or undo what?

ORESTES.

To obtain
Safe quittance for him from this wretched place.

IPHIGENIA.

What would his oath be good for, lacking mine?

ORESTES.

But will the King of Tauris let him sail?

IPHIGENIA.

I can persuade the King and will myself
Go to the ship and put thy friend aboard.

Iphigenia in Tauris

ORESTES.

Then state the oath that thou wilt have him swear.

IPHIGENIA.

Promise to give this letter to my friend.

PYLADES.

I swear to give this letter to thy friend.

IPHIGENIA.

And I to give thee safeguard from this place.

PYLADES.

Thou swearest by what name?

IPHIGENIA.

By Artemis,
Whose favor be upon me in Her temple!

PYLADES.

And I by Zeus Himself, by Heaven's King.

IPHIGENIA.

And if thou failest to fulfill thy oath?

PYLADES.

Then may I never see Argos again! —
And if thou failest in fulfilling thine?

Iphigenia in Tauris

IPHIGENIA.

Then let me fail ever to come to Argos.

PYLADES.

There is one chance that we have not considered.

IPHIGENIA.

A chance, thou meanest, that affects thy word?

PYLADES.

The oath would not be fair if it should happen
That in a storm the vessel should be wrecked
Or strike a rock and everything go down
And yet my life be saved — and not the letter.
In that event I ask to be exempted.

IPHIGENIA.

In any plan, two ways make one way sure . . .
Then let me tell thee carefully word by word
The contents of my letter, thou in turn
To tell it to my friend. And that insures us.
For either thou shalt place it in his hand
And let the silent writing speak or else
The writing, lost, shall echo still in thee.

PYLADES.

That will be safer both for thee and me.
So tell me whom to find for thee in Argos
And what to say to him.

Iphigenia in Tauris

IPHIGENIA.

Say this to him,
Say to Orestes, son of Agamemnon,
A greeting comes from one he thought was dead.
Tell him his sister is not dead at Aulis
But is alive.

ORESTES.

Alive? Iphigenia?
O no! — Unless the dead come back again!

IPHIGENIA.

Thou art beholding her, for I am she.
But let me finish what I ask of him:
“O brother, rescue me! Let me not live
The priestess of a loathly ritual! —
Let me not die forlorn, in a wild land!”

ORESTES.

Where am I, Pylades? What am I hearing?

IPHIGENIA.

“Lest thou, remembering me, shalt have no
peace!” —
The name, thou must repeat it, is Orestes.

PYLADES.

Ye Gods!

Iphigenia in Tauris

IPHIGENIA.

Not Gods but a woman speaks to thee.

PYLADES.

It seemed I heard the Gods — and yet heard thee!
O let me listen further and make sure!

IPHIGENIA.

Tell him that Artemis put out Her hand
And spared my life at Aulis, leaving a deer
To bleed for me instead, and that my father,
Not looking when he struck, thought he slew me.
Artemis brought me here. . . . The letter ends.

PYLADES.

O what an easy oath it is to keep!
Lady, keep thine or not — I keep mine now.
I bring thee this, Orestes, from thy sister.

ORESTES.

How can I look at letters? — Come to me!
O let me look at thee whom I had lost! —
O let me touch thee with my hands and prove
That thou art real and hold thee close, close!

THE THIRD MAIDEN.

Lay not thy hands, no matter who thou art,
Upon those holy robes! —
Bring not indignity to Artemis!

Iphigenia in Tauris

ORESTES.

Thou art my sister, my own father's daughter,
And nature will not let thee turn away
From thy own brother given back to thee.

IPHIGENIA.

Ah, thou wouldst make me think that thou art he! —
Orestes is in Argos and not here.

ORESTES.

No, my poor sister, not in Argos! — here!

IPHIGENIA.

Then was Tyndareus thy mother's father?

ORESTES.

Yes, and my father's grandfather was Pelops.

IPHIGENIA.

What art thou saying? How can I believe thee?

ORESTES.

By asking me about our father's home.

IPHIGENIA.

Then speak of it! — for I am listening! — speak!

ORESTES.

Electra used to tell us tales of Atreus
And of Thyestes, how they came to quarrel.

Iphigenia in Tauris

IPHIGENIA.

It was about a golden lamb they quarreled!

ORESTES.

And thy hands made, with fine embroideries,
A pattern of the quarrel.

IPHIGENIA.

Art thou he?
Art thou in truth my brother? — art thou he?

ORESTES.

There was a picture, on thy loom, of Phœbus
Changing His course. Hast thou forgotten that?

IPHIGENIA.

O not one thread of it have I forgotten!

ORESTES.

There was a bath of bridal fragrances
Thy mother sent to Aulis.— Thou rememberest?

IPHIGENIA.

Everything on that day I can remember —
But happiness.

ORESTES.

A lock of hair that came,
Sent to thy mother.

Iphigenia in Tauris

IPHIGENIA.

A memorial
I meant it for, commemorating me —
To mark a grave where I could never lie.

ORESTES.

And I recall a keepsake in thy room,
The ancient spear that Pelops once had used
To win his bride.

IPHIGENIA.

Orestes, O my brother!
My home has come to me from far away!
For thou art come, I have thee in my arms!

ORESTES.

And I have thee in mine, whom I thought dead!
No wonder that the tears are in our eyes! —
Of joy, not sorrow! — yet of sorrow too!

IPHIGENIA.

Thou wert a baby, when I came away,
Lifted to see me. And thy little arms
Held out to me are come to me again,
Grown strong to comfort me. How can I speak
My joy! There is no language sweet enough!
There is no joy like this. There never was!

THE FOURTH MAIDEN.

And would that we might say it need not end!

Iphigenia in Tauris

IPHIGENIA.

I am bewildered. And I cannot think
What I should say, my friends? — I cannot think
Of anything but joy — except a fear
That he might vanish as he came. O Argos,
Land of my love, my heart is full of thee,
And of my brother thou hast borne and bred
To be a living glory to thy name!

ORESTES.

We who were born to happiness have lived
And learned unhappiness.

IPHIGENIA.

Unhappiness? —
O how I learned it when against my throat
My own unhappy father held the knife!

ORESTES.

I have a vision of his stricken face.

IPHIGENIA.

And the false marriage, when the marriage-hymn
Was made of tears! Not to Achilles' arms
I went, but to the coldness of the altar —
And felt the bitter waters on my head.

ORESTES.

Unhappy daughter and unhappy father!

Iphigenia in Tauris

IPHIGENIA.

But why have pity on a pitiless man
Who brought me all this grief?

ORESTES.

And might have brought
On thee to-day — the slaying of thy brother!

IPHIGENIA.

Some God prevented. But I came so near,
My hand was so impending on the deed,
That I am shaken with the thought of thee —
Dead! . . .

We have seen today a miracle
Begin. How shall it end for thee and me?
How shall I speed thee safely from this place
Of horror home again? For there are swords
To face: a question fitter for thy wit
To weigh than mine, though thou art shaken too.
Shouldst thou be safer travelling by foot
Than by the ship? No, no! — I see thee go
Losing thy way among barbarians
Ashore, encompassed by a thousand deaths.
The ship is better — even that sharp return
Between the Clashing Rocks. Go! — dare the sea,
Take to the ship again! And yet who knows
If God or man shall guide thee on the sea
To liberation? — or if any chance
Can save thee now to make our home a glory?

Iphigenia in Tauris

THE THIRD MAIDEN.

I have heard marvellous tales from story-tellers,
But nothing to compare
With this event which my own eyes have seen.

PYLADES.

Orestes, it is natural for thee
To greet thy sister and recount with her
The happenings of thy house. But there are things
Of urgency to think of: our escape
Out of this land and how to compass it.
For he is wise who makes a friend of Fortune
And goes to meet her when she comes to him.

ORESTES.

Well said! — and let her be well met to-day! —
For every God helps him who helps himself.

IPHIGENIA.

But he shall tell me first about my sister,
About Electra! — Tell me of my sister!

ORESTES.

This is her husband. He has made her happy.

IPHIGENIA.

This man? — But who —

ORESTES.

A Phocian. Strophius' son.

Iphigenia in Tauris

IPHIGENIA.

Then he is Atreus' grandson! — Our own house!

ORESTES.

Thy cousin; my one friend.

IPHIGENIA.

As yet unborn
That day I came away to die!

ORESTES.

The son
Of Strophius in old age.

IPHIGENIA.

I welcome thee,
My sister's husband.

ORESTES.

Closer to me than brother.

IPHIGENIA.

But O our mother? — for thou hast not told me —

ORESTES.

Let us not speak of her! — she killed my father.

IPHIGENIA.

Thou hast not told me why.

Iphigenia in Tauris

ORESTES.

Then do not ask me.

IPHIGENIA.

May I not ask if thou art King of Argos?

ORESTES.

Not King but exile. Menelaus is King.

IPHIGENIA.

What? — in thy time of grief he banished thee?

ORESTES.

Not he but Furies — the avenging Fiends!

IPHIGENIA.

Thy madness on the beach — it was the Fiends?

ORESTES.

Yes, yes! One seeing me might think me mad.

IPHIGENIA.

And they pursue thee for thy mother's death?

ORESTES.

To catch me and to curb me with her blood!

IPHIGENIA.

Thy coming here?

Iphigenia in Tauris

ORESTES.

An oracle of Phœbus.

IPHIGENIA.

Which I may know about?

ORESTES.

O let me tell

My bitter narrative from end to end . . .

After this poor hand had unspeakably
Punished my mother's most unspeakable guilt,
Down on my head they came attacking me,
The Fiends from Hell. Then Phœbus ordered me
To Athens, that I might protest their judgment
At the Tribunal Zeus had sanctified
To the trial of Ares for some ancient sin.

When I arrived there, none of all my friends
Received me. They avoided me at first
As one unclean. Later they pitied me
And gave me food in the same room with them,
But at a separate table. And they served me
An equal measure with themselves and filled
My cup when theirs were filled, but turned
Away and would not look at me nor speak
With me — because I was a murderer. . . .
And I showed no resentment but in silence,
As though I did not care, I thought of her
Whom I had killed and drank my bitter cup.

They say that the Athenians memorize

My sorrow with a feast, the Pitcher Feast,
In which each man drinks his own cup in silence. . . .

When I had come to judgment on that hill,
I on one side and on the other side
The eldest of the Avengers charging me
With murder, Phœbus rose to my defence
And by His eloquence redeemed my life.
For Pallas, in the chair, finding the votes
Cast evenly, for and against me, added
Her own vote for me and acquitted me.

Some of the Furies acquiesced and chose
To infest a Temple close to the Tribunal.
Others defied the verdict as unjust
And turned on me again, tormenting me,
Till I fled back to Phœbus for His aid,
Fell down before the Shrine, faint with despair,
And swore to take my life — unless the God
Who had confounded me would rescue me.

And then out pealed His voice, His golden voice
Above the tripod, telling me to go
Among the Taurians, to take away
Their Artemis of stone carven in Heaven
And to establish it and worship it
In Athens.

Help me now to do this thing!
O help me, sister, to obey the God
And carry out His mission! Help me, sister! —
If only I may take within my hands

Iphigenia in Tauris

The image of the Goddess, I am rid
Of madness! And I urge thee with a gift
Of rugged rowers to row thee back to Argos!
O sister, sister, for our father's house
I beg thy aid, to save that house and me!
Unless we take the Image with thy help,
This very day shall see our house destroyed.

THE FOURTH MAIDEN.

Some God is visiting ancestral sin
Upon new generations.

IPHIGENIA.

How long, before thy coming, had I dreamed
Of thee and of my country! How I wish
With thee the restoration of our house —
Even his house who would have slain me! Brother,
My heart has melted in our misery.
I have no anger left, but only thought
Of thee escaping and our house revived.

What can I do? — how hide from Artemis? —
And how put off the King when he perceives
But empty air upon the pedestal?
I am afraid — no, not of death itself
But of the interim, the dying hope. . . .
If we might take the Image and be quick
And flee together on thy leaping ship! —
But we should fail. Yet if I stay to hide
Thy flight, when the discovery is made

Iphigenia in Tauris

— The ravished Image! — Ah but death is good
If by my dying thou returnest home . . .
If a man die — a house, a name, is lost.
But if a woman die — what does it matter?

ORESTES.

It mattered when my mother died. If now
Thy death were added, I should have to take
Two deaths upon my head. Instead of that,
Let come what may, I mean to share thy fate —
Alive in Greece, or here beside thee dead.

But it is evident the Gods are with us.
If Artemis opposed, should I have been
Expressly sent by Her own Brother here
To bring Her Image back? She wishes it —
For in the very Temple of the Image
As a good omen I have seen thy face!
O what does all this mean but our return?

IPHIGENIA.

How can we steal the Image and not die?

ORESTES.

Can we not kill the King?

IPHIGENIA.

And dare the Gods
Again? — for he was kind to me.

Iphigenia in Tauris

ORESTES.

And yet
It might be dared — if it would save our lives!

IPHIGENIA.

I like thy boldness. But it cannot be.

ORESTES.

Shall I stay hidden in the shrine till dark?

IPHIGENIA.

And then at night escape?

ORESTES.

Are we not thieves?
The day for honest men, the night for thieves!

IPHIGENIA.

We could not pass the guards.

ORESTES.

What can we do then?

IPHIGENIA.

Perhaps we —

ORESTES.

What?

Iphigenia in Tauris

IPHIGENIA.

May use our own misfortune!

ORESTES.

Women have ways of changing ill to good.

IPHIGENIA.

I shall announce thee as a matricide! . . .

ORESTES.

If there is good in that, make use of it!

IPHIGENIA.

As one unworthy to be sacrificed!

ORESTES.

Thou meanest? — ah but I can guess!

IPHIGENIA.

Unclean,
Unpurified and unacceptable!

ORESTES.

But how does that attain our purpose?

IPHIGENIA.

Pure
Sea-water must be used to cleanse thy sin!

Iphigenia in Tauris

ORESTES.

But that would mean the Image left behind
And all our labor unfulfilled.

IPHIGENIA.

She too,
Having been touched by thy approach, must be
Washed clean, the Image too!

ORESTES.

And might it be —
There, by the inlet —?

IPHIGENIA.

Where thy ship is moored.

ORESTES.

And who will bring the Image? — none but thee?

IPHIGENIA.

For none may ever carry it but me.

ORESTES.

And Pylades? — is he a murderer too?

IPHIGENIA.

He aided thee. He also must be cleansed.

ORESTES.

A story for the guards — but for the King?

Iphigenia in Tauris

IPHIGENIA.

In any case I could not keep it from him.
So he shall hear it and shall be persuaded.

ORESTES.

The oarsmen shall be ready for their orders,
But here ashore thine is the sole command.

Yet let me ask one question. Will these women
Be true to thee and not betray thee? Pray
For their assistance. Urge them and convince them.
Thou, as a woman, knowest woman well.
Then use the power of thy need of pity . . .
And, after that, let Heaven's high will be done!

IPHIGENIA.

O friends who have been near and dear to me,
I trust you! On you depends my destiny,
Whether I keep or lose my home, my kin.
Woman to women, I appeal to you.
For, knowing our own weakness, we are bound
To feel a woman's need and to defend
Our sex and to be loyal. Will you not
Be silent now for my sake? This is all,
Yes, all I ask of you,—only your silence.
By honoring us, do yourselves honor too!

See how a single chance is left us three! . . .
Discovery means death. Escape means home!

If I escape, shall I not work for you
Till I deliver you?—till thou and thou

Iphigenia in Tauris

Shall join me in my joy at home in Hellas —
And thou and thou! I pray thee by thy hand;
Thee by thy cheek; thy knees; thee by thy home;
Thy father and thy mother; thee, thyself
A mother with a child away from thee,
I pray thee by that child: — be merciful!

O which of you consent? — and which refuse,
When to refuse us means betraying us?

THE FIRST MAIDEN.

O count upon us, Lady, on our love —
And go thy way content!
By Zeus we swear unbroken loyalty.

IPHIGENIA.

I bless you for those words. I wish you joy.

(To Orestes and Pylades)

Now do thy part — and thine. Enter the
Temple.

The King will soon be here to make inquiry
Whether the strangers have been sacrificed.

(Orestes and Pylades go into the Temple)

Grim Goddess, having saved me once before,
Now save me with my brother and his friend,
Lest Phœbus be disproved because of Thee

Iphigenia in Tauris

And men forsake His oracle! O come
In gracious might away from this bleak place,
Away from gloom — to Athens and to glory!

(She follows into the Temple)

THE SECOND MAIDEN.

O sad-voiced ocean-bird, heard in the foam
Low by the rocky ledge
Singing a note unhappy hearts can hear,
The song of separation from thy mate,
The moan of separation,
I have no wings to seek like thee, but I
Can sing a song like thee,
A song of separation from my mates.

At home in Hellas now are gathering
My kinsmen. Artemis
Blesses the new-born from Her Cynthian hill
And soothes the mothers with the cooling palm
And bay and olive-tree,
Where once Latona loved the winding streams
And watched the rounded pools
White with the song-like motion of the swans.

Alas! the falling tears, the towers fallen,
The taking of our towns!
Alas! the clash of bright and angry spears
That captured me aboard an alien ship! —

Iphigenia in Tauris

Whence I was sold away
To be an exile here, a handmaiden
With Agamemnon's daughter,
Doomed to the bloody rites of Artemis.

THE FOURTH MAIDEN.

And at these altars where the sacrifice
Is not of sheep but men,
I envy those unhappy from their birth;
For to be bred and seasoned in misfortune
Is to be iron to it. . . .
O there is something in the pang of change
More than the heart can bear —
Unhappily remembering happiness.

THE FIRST MAIDEN.

Lady, a ship is here to take thee home,
And in the rowers' ears
Pan shall be sounding all his pointed notes,
Great mountains echoing to his little reed,
And Phœbus on his lyre
Shall strike profound the seven strings and sing
To thee of Attica,
Shall sing to thee of home and lead thee there.

Oar after oar shall dip and carry thee,
Lady, away from me,
Oar after oar shall push the empty sea
Wider, wider, leaving me lonely here,

Iphigenia in Tauris

Leaving me here without thee.
And forward over the unceasing bow
Thy sail shall faster run,
Ever refilling with the unspent wind.

THE SECOND MAIDEN.

O to go swiftly like the wingèd sun
Upon his dazzling track
And not to let my golden light be folded
Until I touched my house, my roof, my room!
Then I should go again
To noble marriages and take my place
In the bright company,
Give them my hands and circle round and dance.

And I should strive to be the loveliest
In all my looks and ways,
In my unrivalled brightness of attire
And in the motion of my hands and feet;
And my embroidered veil
I should hold closely round me as I danced
And I should hide my cheek
In the soft shadow of my clustering curls.

(Enter King Thoas with Soldiers)

THOAS.

Where is the keeper of the Temple-gates,
The maid of Hellas? Is her labor done? —

Iphigenia in Tauris

Are the victims' bodies burning in the shrine?

A MAIDEN.

See where she comes, to answer thee herself.

(Iphigenia comes out of the Temple, carrying the Image).

THOAS.

What does this mean, daughter of Agamemnon?
Why hast thou brought the Image from its place?

IPHIGENIA.

O King, stand back!—stand back beyond the
threshold!

THOAS.

Is it some new observance in the Temple?

IPHIGENIA.

Stay back, I tell thee, from Her holy presence!

THOAS.

I will stay back, but tell me, tell me why
Thou bearest Her like this.

IPHIGENIA.

The sacrifice
Thou gavest to the Goddess was unclean.

Iphigenia in Tauris

THOAS.

How dost thou know? — what makes thee think —

IPHIGENIA.

She turned
Away from them,— away when they approached.

THOAS.

Might it not be some tremor of the ground
That moved Her.

IPHIGENIA.

No. By Her own will She moved —
And even for a moment shut Her eyes.

THOAS.

Because of blood upon the strangers' hands?

IPHIGENIA.

It was Her divination of their guilt.

THOAS.

Whose blood? A Taurian's blood? — killed on the
beach?

IPHIGENIA.

The guilt was with them when they came; the stain
Of killing their own kin!

Iphigenia in Tauris

THOAS.

Their kin? What kin?

IPHIGENIA.

A mother! — whom they murdered in cold blood!

THOAS.

O great Apollo, what barbarian
Would do the thing these Greeks have done?

IPHIGENIA.

But Greeks
Disowned and homeless, hunted out of Hellas.

THOAS.

Even then why bring the Image here?

IPHIGENIA.

Defiled,
She must be purified, be touched again
By Her own firmament.

THOAS.

How dost thou know
So well the nature of their infamy?

IPHIGENIA.

Seeing Her turn away, I asked them why.

Iphigenia in Tauris

THOAS.

Thou art a Greek, quick-witted, a true Greek!

IPHIGENIA.

They too are Greeks. They thought they could
appease me

With pleasant news.

THOAS.

Of Argos?

IPHIGENIA.

Of my brother,
News of Orestes.

THOAS.

To inveigle thee!

IPHIGENIA.

And of my father — that he lives and prospers.

THOAS.

Thou hadst no doubt, however, of thy duty?

IPHIGENIA.

Has not all Hellas well deserved my hate?

THOAS.

What must we do with them?

Iphigenia in Tauris

IPHIGENIA.

Observe the law.

THOAS.

Thou meanest with the water and the knife?

IPHIGENIA.

First fully cleanse them of their sin.

THOAS.

With water
From a bubbling spring or from the salty sea?

IPHIGENIA.

The sea is the absolver of all evil.

THOAS.

The sea would better please the Goddess then?

IPHIGENIA.

And me.

THOAS.

The breakers almost reach these walls.

IPHIGENIA.

But certain of the rites are secret rites.

THOAS.

Then choose thy place and fear no trespasser.

Iphigenia in Tauris

IPHIGENIA.

And I must purify the Image too.

THOAS.

Have they contaminated even Her?

IPHIGENIA.

So that I had to bring Her from Her place.

THOAS.

Thanks for thy reverential care.

IPHIGENIA.

O King,
Command the help I need.

THOAS.

Ask — it is given.

IPHIGENIA.

Then let the strangers be well bound.

THOAS.

Why that?
Where could they think to flee?

IPHIGENIA.

Beware of Greeks!

Iphigenia in Tauris

THOAS.

(To his Servants)

Go, bind them.

IPHIGENIA.

Have them brought to me.

THOAS.

And bring them.

IPHIGENIA.

But hang a heavy veil over their heads.

THOAS.

For they must not be witnessed by the sun.

IPHIGENIA.

Send soldiers with me.

THOAS.

Choose thy guard from these.

IPHIGENIA.

And let a herald warn all citizens.

THOAS.

Of what?

IPHIGENIA.

To stay indoors till this is done.

Iphigenia in Tauris

THOAS.

Lest they as well might suffer the contagion?

IPHIGENIA.

From matricide.

THOAS.

Go tell the herald this.

IPHIGENIA.

And anyone I care for —

THOAS.

Meaning — me?

IPHIGENIA.

Him above all I caution against harm,
Not to come near.

THOAS.

Thou carest what we do.

IPHIGENIA.

Thou seest.

THOAS.

And what thou dost means much to us.

IPHIGENIA.

Wait here, O King — thy share is in the Temple.

Iphigenia in Tauris

THOAS.

To —

IPHIGENIA.

Purify it with the smoke of torches.

THOAS.

It shall be fragrant, priestess, to receive thee.

IPHIGENIA.

When they come by —

THOAS.

What must I do?

IPHIGENIA.

Hold up
Thy robe and look away.

THOAS.

From the contagion.

IPHIGENIA.

And if I seem delayed —

THOAS.

How shall I tell?

IPHIGENIA.

Be not surprised, but patient.

THOAS.

Take thy time
And serve the Goddess to the uttermost.

IPHIGENIA.

If it but end as I desire! —

THOAS.

And I!

IPHIGENIA.

Ah, here they come! — the strangers and the robes,
And lambs whose blood shall offset other blood,
And burning torches and all instruments
Purification needs for them and Her.

Away, O citizens, be not polluted!
You keepers of the gates, keep clean your hands!
Men who would marry, women who would bear,
Be not polluted! — look away — away!

O Virgin Goddess, if these murderers
Be cleansed as I would have them cleansed and Thou
Be brought as well where I would have Thee
brought,
Thy Temple shall be clean and we be blest!
I say no more — but Thou and those who know
May render the conclusion of my prayer.

Iphigenia in Tauris

(The procession passes out. Thoas enters the Temple)

THE THIRD MAIDEN.

Latona bore one day a golden Child,
O Artemis, Thy Brother,
Phœbus, the darling of the vales of Delos —

THE FIRST MAIDEN.

Whose little fingers hovered on the harp
And pulled at archery.

THE THIRD MAIDEN.

Leaving His birthplace, to Parnassus' top
The Mother brought Her Boy —

THE SECOND MAIDEN.

Where Dionysus flings the waterfall.

THE THIRD MAIDEN.

There hidden coiling in the leafy laurels
A serpent, with bright scales
And blood-red eyes, a creature born of Earth,
Guarded the cave that held Earth's oracle.
Phœbus, beholding it, leaped up
Out of His Mother's arms, a little Child,
And struck the serpent dead —

THE SECOND MAIDEN.

And on that day began His prophecies.

THE FOURTH MAIDEN.

Phœbus Apollo, Thou hast won the throne,
The tripod of the truth!
And in the very centre of the earth
Thou hearest wisdom; and Thy voice conveys,
Accompanied by all
The run and ripple of Castalian springs,
The inmost oracles
That ever Heaven whispered to the Earth.

THE THIRD MAIDEN.

But Earth had wished the oracles to go
To Themis, Her own daughter,
And in Her anger bred a band of dreams
That in the night should be oracular
To men, foretelling truth.
And this impaired the dignity of Phœbus
And of His oracles —

THE SECOND MAIDEN.

And the baby God went hurrying to Zeus,
Coaxed with His little hands and begged of Zeus
To send the dreams away . . .

THE FIRST MAIDEN.

And He was very pleased to have His son
Come straight to Him with troubles. And His
head
Decided with a nod

Iphigenia in Tauris

And bade men turn from the prophetic dark
And every haunting shape —

THE FOURTH MAIDEN.

And listen only to the lips of Light.

A MESSENGER.

(Entering breathless)

O all you ministers and temple-guards,
Where is King Thoas gone? Open the gates
And call King Thoas out! O call the King!

THE FIRST MAIDEN.

If we may ask unbidden — is something wrong?

THE MESSENGER.

The two young men have broken free and fled,
With Agamemnon's daughter aiding them —
And on their ship have taken Artemis!

THE FIRST MAIDEN.

A likely story! — Wouldst thou find the King,
He left the Temple but a moment since.

THE MESSENGER.

Where was he bound?

Iphigenia in Tauris

THE FIRST MAIDEN.

I do not know which way.

THE SECOND MAIDEN.

Go look for him, go find him with thy story!

THE MESSENGER.

O treacherous women! You would put me off,
You are in the plot yourselves!

THE THIRD MAIDEN.

Art thou gone mad?

What are these men to us? Quick! To the
Palace!

THE MESSENGER.

Not till I know to my own satisfaction,
Not till I rouse the keepers of the Shrine
To answer me! Ho! You inside! Unbar
The door! The King, if he is there, tell him
A messenger has come with evil news!

(He beats at the door)

THOAS.

(Appearing at the Temple-Door)

Who makes this outcry, desecrates the door
And shakes this holy place?

Iphigenia in Tauris

THE MESSENGER.

Their fault! — their fault!

They told me thou wert absent from the Temple,
They put me off from finding thee.

THOAS.

But why?

Why should they wish —

THE MESSENGER.

Let that come afterward.

O listen first to what I have to tell! —

Iphigenia who was priestess here

Has joined the strangers, fled with them and taken
Artemis' Image! — the cleansing was a lie!

THOAS.

Unthinkable! — What evil influence —

THE MESSENGER.

The chance to save Orestes — yes, Orestes!

THOAS.

Orestes? — which Orestes? Not her brother?

THE MESSENGER.

Yes, whom the Goddess wanted for Her altar.

THOAS.

It is impossible, I cannot grasp it!

Iphigenia in Tauris

THE MESSENGER.

But do not stop to grasp it! — listen first,
Consider what to do! — and then command
What means may intercept and capture them!

THOAS.

There is no danger in these Taurian Seas
Of their escaping. For the way is shut —
Stationed and cordoned with a ring of ships!

THE MESSENGER.

No sooner had we reached the bend of shore
Which hid their ship, than Agamemnon's daughter
Made signs to us to drop the rope that bound
The men, to leave them and fall back. It seemed
That she was ready to perform the rites,
To light the mystic flame and bless the sea.
She took the rope herself and followed them
Still further. And we felt presentiment
Of something wrong. But what were we to do?
We heard her voice chant a high mystery
Of phrases in an unknown tongue, seeming
To us the ceremonial incantation,
The ritual of purifying sin.
And then we waited a long time. At last
The fear occurred to us that they had burst
Their bonds, had killed her and escaped. But still
We waited, fearing with an equal fear
To see what was forbidden us to see . . .

Until with one accord agreeing to it
We disobeyed and went to find them.

There

We saw the ship from Hellas near the shore,
And fitted in the tholes were fifty oars
Like feathers in a wing, and just astern
The two youths boarding her. Some held the prow
With poles thrust in the water, others brought
The anchor up. The rest had made of rope
A ladder hanging from the rail. By this
We knew their scheme. And we laid hold at once
Of the Greek maid and seized the trailing ladder
And pulled their rudder-oar away from them
To cripple them and cried: "What treachery
Is this? — to steal our priestess and our God?
Who art thou and whose son to raid our land
And bear our priestess off?" And he replied:
"I am Orestes, son of Agamemnon,
I am her brother. Now you know the truth.
And she is bound for Greece, out of which land
I lost her long ago — bound home!"

We clung

To her and meant to drag her from her friends
To thee; which is the way I came by these,
This bruise — and this. They struck my face both
sides.

They had no weapons, we had none. We used
Our fists and they their fists, even their feet
With kicks well-aimed at us from where they stood

Above us — at our heads and sides. We fought
Till we were breathless. Then, with bruises
And cuts and blood-filled eyes, we climbed the cliff
And, from our vantage, pelted them with stones —
Till the Greek archers had arranged their bows
And kept us a distance with their arrows.

Then when a giant wave bore them inshore,
Orestes quickly lifted up his sister
Out of the rush of it. Holding her high
On his left shoulder, plunging stride by stride,
He caught the ladder, swung aboard the ship
And held her safe on deck. And she, she held —
She had it still — the Image out of Heaven,
The Image of the Daughter of high Zeus!

Then a glad call exulted through the ship:
“O mariners of Hellas, grip your oars
And clip the sea to foam! O let your arms
Be strong, for we have won, have won, have won
What we set out to win! We have defied
The jagged Clashing Rocks — and we have won!”

A shout of joy responded and the ship
Quivered with dipping oars and shot ahead.
But this was only while the shelter lasted;
For at the harbor-mouth a high wave met her
And threw her off her course. She turned about,
Caught by the stormy wind, until her stern
Was foremost and her prow toward shore. They
tugged

The oars, rallied and strained — but every time

Iphigenia in Tauris

They brought her round, the deep wave dragged her
back

Again. And Agamemnon's daughter stood
And prayed: "O save me, Artemis, from this
Unhappy place — to Hellas! — and forgive
My theft! As Thou, O Goddess, lovest well
Phœbus, Thy brother, shall I not love mine?"

The sailors' praises echoing her prayer,
They bent their bodies and their great bare arms
And shoulders, swaying like the sea,
To the boatswain's cry. But closer to the cliff,
Closer and closer still they drew. And some
Sprang out into the sea. And some began
Attempts to fasten hold on the sharp shore
With ropes. And then our men despatched me
here,

O King, to tell thee of this thing. . . . So come
With chains and cords — for while the sea is high,
There is no earthly chance of their escape!

Poseidon, God of the Sea, remembering Troy,
The city that He loved, confounds today
The wretched children of her enemies
And will deliver up to thee and thine
The son and daughter of the King of Argos —
That daughter who, forgetful now of Aulis,
Betrays the Goddess who was kind to her.

(The Messenger goes out)

Iphigenia in Tauris

THE FIRST MAIDEN.

O Lady, Lady! — O alas for thee!

In Taurian hands again,

Thou and thy brother surely now shall die!

THOAS.

Come, citizens, and be uncivilized!

Leap on your horses! Whip them to the beach!

Wait with me there until a wave shall break

That ship from Hellas. Then — be after them!

And hunt them down, each damnèd dog of
them!

Do this for Artemis. And some of you

Go launch my galleys, lest one man of them

Should die untortured! Run them down by sea

And land! Go hurl them from the cliffs!

O catch them, kill them, crucify them, end them!

And as for you, you miserable women,

Count on the punishment you have deserved

By treachery! I have not time for you —

With this to do. But O when this is done!

*(In the confusion appears, with instant dominion,
Pallas Athena)*

ATHENA.

Be calm, King Thoas! What is this pursuit?

Hold back and listen to Athena's word.

Iphigenia in Tauris

Hold back the soldiers, hold them every one.
Apollo sent Orestes to this land
To free him from the Fiends of punishment
And told him, through the oracle, to bring
Iphigenia home again to Argos
And likewise to my land the holy Image. . . .
That is my word. And let me follow it
With news that this Orestes thou wouldst hunt
Is gliding on a comfortable sea
Made easy by Poseidon for my sake.

Orestes! — thou canst hear a God far-off —
Obey me! Take thy sister and the Image
Safely to Hellas. Go to God-built Athens
And, passing through, go forward to the end
Of Attica. Find there a holy place
Close to Carystus' hill, a place called Halae.
There build a Temple. There set up the Image.
Name it for Tauris, to immortalize
Thy penitence and thy deliverance,
Thy labors and thy love. Let men acclaim
The Taurian Artemis, brought there by thee.

And let this be the law: When they observe
Her festival . . . in token of thy fate
The priest must hold against a human throat
The sharp blade of his knife and touch the edge
With blood, then cease — meaning that life, not
death,
Is the true element of sacrifice.

Iphigenia! — there are steps for thee
Hewn to the rocky Shrine of Artemis
At Brauron. There the keys be in thy keeping.
There shalt thou die, be buried and receive
Upon thy grave most honorable gifts,
The purely-woven raiment of dead mothers
Who honorably died in giving birth.

O Thoas, I command thee, send to Hellas
These women. They were true.—

I saved thee once,
Orestes, when on Ares' hill I judged thee
And voted for thee when the votes were equal.
Now let it be the law that he who earns
An equally-divided verdict wins
His case. Therefore go safely from this land,
O son of Agamemnon. And thou, Thoas,
Be thou content to put thy wrath away.

THOAS.

He who is discontented when the Gods
Have given judgment — is a fool. For my part,
Goddess, I bear no grudge against Orestes
Nor against her who took away the Image.
I make no opposition to a God,
For where would be the use? So let them go
In peace and set the Image in Thy land.
These women too may go — they shall be sent
To Hellas to be happy. At Thy word,

Iphigenia in Tauris

I bid my ships turn back from the pursuit . . .
Behold my spirit and my spear bowed down.

ATHENA.

Well-spoken! For thy spirit learns a law
Greater than thou and greater than the Gods.

O winds of heaven, blow Orestes home —
And I will guide him on his way to Athens,
Guarding Thy Image, Artemis, my Sister.

THE FIRST MAIDEN.

Fare well in your good-fortune! May it bring
Joy to you always.

THE FOURTH MAIDEN.

Pallas Athena, blessed is Thy name

In Heaven as on the earth.

Let us be mindful that Thy words are wise
And welcome and unlooked-for and complete

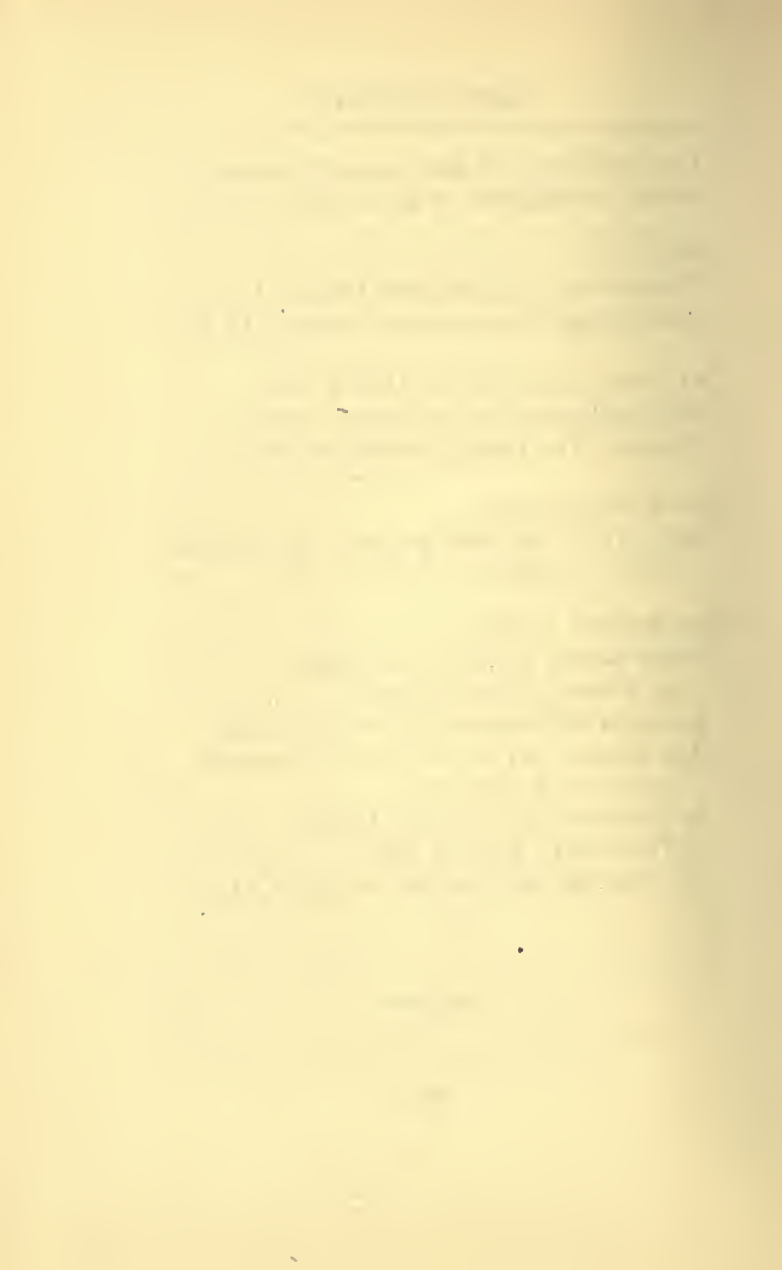
And let us do Thy will,

O Conqueror of hatred and of fear! . . .

The more in Thee we lose

Our lives, the more we find our life in Thee.

THE END



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